

# ***1939 – BRITAIN AT WAR***

## **Hitler Strikes East**

On March 15 1939 German troops invaded Czechoslovakia and occupied Prague two days later British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlin accused Hitler of breaking his word. On March 22, German troops occupied the old German city of Memel in Lithuania forcing that state to sign a treaty conceding Memel's return to Germany. Recognising a parallel between Memel and the old German city of Danzig in Poland, the Poles announced on March 28 that any German attempt to alter Danzig's status without Poland's consent would lead to war. On March 31 Britain extended to Poland a unilateral guarantee against German aggression. Diplomatic talks also began between the West and the Soviet Union seeking similar guarantees for Poland against potential German aggression. For their part the Germans had never completely abandoned the idea of a pact with the Soviet Union and the deterioration of German-Polish relations revived the notion of such a pact. Preliminary German approaches to the Soviets were made at the end of July were well received and with this reassurance Hitler proceeded with the next stage of his plan, the fabrication of an excuse for war with Poland. This took the form of reprisals against Polish customs inspectors in Danzig. The Polish reaction was that any physical action against their customs officials in Danzig would be regarded as an act of aggression against the Polish state.

Thus the stage was set; the world was startled when on August 21 the Nazi-Soviet non-aggression pact was announced. This included a secret protocol putting all of the Baltic States and the eastern half of Poland into the Soviet sphere of influence. The rest of Eastern

Europe went to Germany. In the meantime, with his Eastern front secure, Hitler had already given the order to provoke the break with Poland over the customs official's dispute and on August 31 the final order was given for the attack to begin at 4.45 the next day.

The German attack on Poland ended any hopes of peace with Britain. On September 3 the British ambassador in Berlin was instructed to deliver an ultimatum to Hitler at 9.00 advising that if German troops in Poland did not end all aggressive action by 11.00 that day then Britain and Germany would be at war. Two hours later the ultimatum expired and the Second World War had begun. At 4.45 bombers and fighters of the Luftwaffe began their systematic destruction of Polish airfields, road and rail centres. Within two days they had established air superiority over the whole country and could revert to the more tactical role of supporting the armoured spearheads. At the end of the first week much of the Polish forces were surrounded cut off from their bases and supplies fighting piecemeal actions instead of coming together against an enemy who only had to hold position to win. In eight days armoured spearheads had reached the outskirts of Warsaw having covered 140 miles. Here the Germans halted and formed a solid line against which the Poles hammered away in vain for another week while to the north and the south two prongs of an outer trap were gradually encircling the bulk of the Polish army. However the first assault on the Polish capital met with very stubborn resistance, even the civilian population took an active part in the fighting, and the Germans were halted with severe losses. One Panzer regiment which started the assault with 120 tanks had only 57 left in a very short time. Soon Hitler abandoned his aim of capturing the city, instead he called for capitulation and although his demands were rejected Warsaw was subjected to constant artillery fire from now onwards.

Despite all the difficulties and heart breaking experiences of the past 16 days the Polish High Command were not without hope, they believed that very soon the great offensive of the Western Allies would begin and soon the Germans would be forced to withdraw from their country. This all changed when just before dawn on September 17 the Russian army moved in from the east to take up their share of the spoils which had been agreed between the two dictatorships the previous month. The Polish government and High Command and indeed the German High Command were taken completely by surprise. The Polish-Russian frontier was only weakly guarded and in just two days the Soviet spearheads penetrated 60 miles into Poland. Many of the defending troops had already moved to the west to counter the German advances. On September 21 Russian troops moving westwards reached the previously agreed line of demarcation and soon made contact with a German infantry company. For the most part the Germans were correct and conciliatory although there were occurrences of fighting and a reluctance to give up territory already occupied. Fighting continued in Warsaw until September 29 when, with food and ammunition running out the city capitulated. All hostilities came to an end on October 1 when the Polish Navy surrendered.

The fighting had been particularly bloody with the Poles putting up a gallant resistance. The Germans had all the advantages of the aggressor plus an overwhelming superiority in the air. Despite the brilliance of the campaign, it led Hitler to the false conclusion that his army could prevail no matter what the conditions; an illusion that was to lead to serious consequences in the future.